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Hawk in a trap



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The Hawk

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In a detention facility in Manhattan, not far from the cell where Jeffrey Epstein committed suicide, the senior Israeli private investigator Aviram Azari, known as "Aviram Natz," has been imprisoned for almost nine months. The FBI claims that Azari is at the heart of two cyber cases that are stirring the United States and Europe, and mediating between elements who wanted to break into sensitive emails, to a mysterious hacker group known as the "Dark Basin". Azari denies everything, but since his arrest And the oligarchs who employed him in their most secret and intimate investigations, do not sleep at night, because if a "hawk" opens his mouth, it .will be an earthquake

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Ronen Bergman, Ido Shabertzuch

Last Rosh Hashanah, a team of FBI agents, reinforced by local New York City police, waited in the JFK hall. They carefully examined the passengers who had just landed from Israel. And they knew exactly who they were waiting for

In those seconds, members of the Azari family also got off the plane: the two daughters and the son, the mother Maggie and the father of the family, Aviram Azari, who is better known as "Aviram Natz", one of the top private investigators in Israel, the secret man of many influential Israelis. Even for a kind of legend. The Azari family was in high spirits: the plan was that from here they would continue to Miami, for a dream vacation in the royal suite of a luxury ship that would sail to the Bahamas



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... לי בנט ואיילת שקד

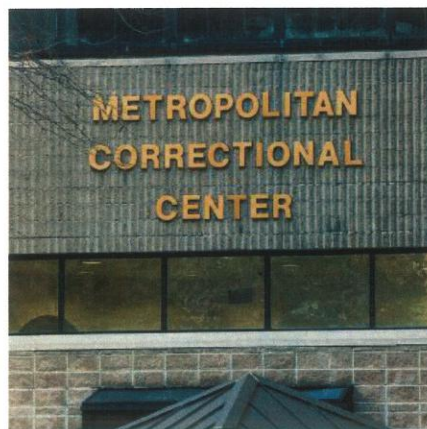
...בית השנטי, מדברת

Privacy policy

Recorded in the studios of the Central Library for the Blind and Visually Impaired

When they entered the terminal, law enforcement officers approached them, and with a cold American politeness and with a lot of "brass, sir," separated Aviram Azeri, and took him away. This is the last time his family saw him. "Suddenly he disappeared from me," recalls one of his friends. "Does not respond on WhatsApp, does not answer calls. Only after a few hours did a mutual friend update that his wife Maggie had called. She sounded in a complete market, confused and at a loss." The shocked family tried to find out: Why? where? Is this a misidentification

On the last question they got an answer relatively quickly: No, that's not really a mistake. Azari was taken to MCC, a federal detention facility in the heart of Manhattan, and housed in a cell not far from where Jeffrey Epstein committed suicide. One of his associates says he is incarcerated, "on guard and security terms as if he were a mafia employee assassin." No visits, there is very little communication with him. And a lot of fog.



One thing was clear: the Americans waited a long time to get their hands on a "hawk." The indictment against him was prepared in advance, and when he was exposed it became clear to the astonishment of his family that the Americans attribute to Azeri a series of very serious cybercrimes. According to the indictment, for the past six years, Azari has been at the center of an international network that has made sophisticated hacking into e-mail boxes of U.S. citizens. Azari, the Americans claim, mediated between the client, and the hacker company from India, which actually carried them out. Who orders?

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The MCC detention facility in Manhattan. "As if he were a mafia employee assassin" Photo: Reuters

Who allegedly broke into? What is the reason? All of these remained confidential, even in the indictment. What is certain is that for the Americans, this is a serious affair: the prosecutor informed Azari's lawyer that she would demand 20 years in prison. no less

Since then, almost nine months, only a little of the mystery surrounding the affair has dissipated. Azari is still in custody under harsh conditions – one of the few people in contact with him claims he has lost 30 kilos of his weight – and the first hearing in the trial is set for August only. Some people around Azari have a sense that the Americans are waiting for a hawk to break down and become a witness, in exchange for relief from the charges. "We are under the impression that we might want to 'dry' it a bit," says one of the experts in the affair. "Let him feel what might happen to him, if he does not reveal to them everything they are looking for

?of such

".Especially those who hired his services"

Such a scenario, in which someone like a hawk opens his mouth, is the nightmare of quite a few people in the United States, Europe – and also in Israel. Azari, who until the mid-1990s was an investigator in a special unit of the Israel Police, has become the "black box" of many cases and events in the last two decades. In his office passed oligarchs, senior economic and business leaders and some of the most powerful people in the country. "We need to understand who Aviram is in our world," says a very veteran private investigator.

"It's not just a person who has super-heavy, super-respectable and super-famous customers in super-explosive portfolios. He's also the one who has given such and such services to a large part of the industry. If he 'opens' – God have mercy

The researcher declined to elaborate on what services were involved, emphasizing that he only "heard about them from friends." But the fear is that one day, the FBI will apply to the Israeli Ministry of Justice, requesting to expand the investigation into the case. A private investigator told Yedioth Ahronoth that when the arrest became known in Israel, there were private investigators and some of the hawk's customers who hurried to carefully delete correspondence and emails between them and Azari. According to one source, the heads of a large economic company that hired the services of Azari were so apprehensive that they took care to physically destroy their computers with the help of hammers, and scattered their remains in different and separate places

Why the big fear? Because apart from all the sensitive cases and secrets that Azari was exposed to in the country, world reports link the Hawk's investigation to two world-wide affairs. In both cases, an agent ordered a hack into a long line of sensitive emails

The first affair concerns Axon Mobile, one of the largest energy corporations in the world. For the past five years, there has been a public campaign that has earned the hashtag #ExxKnew ("Exxon Knew"). As part of the campaign, claims are made that the giant corporation has apparently known for decades about the effects of climate change, but has hidden the information in its possession. Exxon denies. Someone – there is no evidence at the moment that this is Axon herself or anyone on her behalf – has started breaking into the private mailboxes of lawyers, environmental activists and journalists who have dealt with this story

The second episode is stirring Europe these days and stars at the top of the editions there. It takes place around a huge German credit clearing company called Wirecard. Journalists and economists who have made allegations about Wickard's conduct and wondered about the company's sources of revenue have also fallen victim to mysterious cyber hacks. Again, it is unknown at this time what he will do after leaving the post. Ingo Melcher, a journalist from the German The Time, who has published numerous

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investigations into Wickard and was the target of the mysterious cyber-attacks, is convinced: "If Azari decides to reveal who ordered these hacks from him – it could be a .real storm

Is Azari really related to any of these? And will he speak? Azari's lawyers deny the allegations against him. One of his associates says: "In order to commit against the Americans the offenses attributed to him in the indictment, and then to suddenly wound up at an American airport as if for nothing – one must be a perfect idiot or a perfect .fucker. And Aviram cannot be said to be this or that

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Hadar neighborhood in Haifa, 1980s. Although quite a few of the boys around him turn to the world of crime, Aviram Azari does just the opposite. After serving as a fighter in the 890th Paratroopers Regiment, he actually enlists in the police. The special unit he joins, is looking for particularly intelligent people, who can assimilate into the field in seconds and track the "heaviest" destinations of the underworld. Officially, it is called the 'Police .Tracking Unit'. But everyone knows her by her nickname: "The Undertaker

Like all "undercover" people, Azari also enters a tedious path that includes learning surveillance, camouflage, photography and dubbing techniques. The training is conducted on a secret and separate basis, in order to keep the identity of the unit members confidential. "The undercover men are walking around without any sign of the police," says retired Deputy Chief of Staff Ephraim Erlich ("Kremschnitt"), who served in the unit. "They wear civilian or disguised clothes, without a police officer's certificate. Even their .family does not know they are serving in the unit. You will not see them making arrests

Some of the unit's training takes place with similar units of the IDF, the GSS and the Mossad. According to a person who participated in these exercises, Azari was known as an excellent follower. And in understanding what needs to be done so that the object does .not discover us," says a person who served with him in the unit

Azeri "undercover" was involved in several police investigations. According to a source who served in the police at the time, he was involved, among other things, in tracking down .Zeev Rosenstein, the number one target of the police at the time

People with such abilities are rare, and the police expected Azari to have a bright future.

But in 1996 he surprised everyone, and announced: I'm retiring. "He just started dating Maggie," says a close friend, "and felt he could not support her and the family he wanted .with the tiny government salary as a cop

Azari took his rare talent and the experience he gained in "Undercover," and entered the world of private investigations. After several years in various offices, Azari decided to .open his own office, 'Aviram Natz Investigations and Surveillance

The beginning was faltering. The world of private investigations is kissing the gray area, but the good investigators know where the line is. But Azari, at least in the beginning, crossed it. The story goes like this: In 2001, a business company from the north ran into financial difficulties, and the court appointed a liquidator for it. The liquidator applied for a restraining order to leave the company, and opened an enforcement case. So far everything is routine. But it seems that the owner of the company did not like the move, .and turned to Azari

According to the indictment filed in the case, Azari and the company owner wanted to blackmail the joint. To this end, Azari turned to the services of Lilia, an escort girl. He introduced himself as an investigator working with the Israel Police and sought its services, ostensibly with the aim of exposing men who impersonate impotent and receive compensation from the state. Lilia agreed. Azari drove her to a gas station, where the joint will also be refueled. Lilia started a "casual" small talk with the joint, and took his business card with her at the end. A few months later, Lilia made an appointment with the

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joint at a Tel Aviv cafe, and at the end, the two went to the beach, where they had sex.
 .Azari's people documented what happened

About a month later, an envelope arrived at the liquidator's office with intimate photos of him and Lilia, and later a phone call with an offer to waive the proceedings in the company owner's case. The liquidator turned to the police, and an indictment was filed against Azari and the company owner. Azari signed a mitigating plea deal, under which his private investigator's license would be revoked for three years, in exchange for an admission of relatively minor offenses. "The wrongdoing in the defendant's conduct speaks for itself and we believe it justifies a punishment that carries with it a revocation of the employment license for a significant period, with all the economic consequences that have to be said," Judge Oded Modrik wrote in his decision. Eventually the period was shortened .and Azari returned to work

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Apparently the lesson from the Lilia affair was learned, Azeri changed direction, and began to concentrate more and more on the global market. Case after case, he has built for himself a ramified system of researchers and connections in many countries. At one point, when an Israeli investigator needed an interrogation abroad, he knew that the hawk ".was the address. "He managed to solve any problem that arose outside of Israel

Our activities are spread across the five continents of the world with an emphasis on" Europe, the United States, India and Africa," boasts the Hawk website. "Agency staff, who work in full coordination, enable us to conduct international investigations very efficiently, conduct surveillance and obtain information anywhere in the world in a short ".time

At the same time, the cases he handled in Israel also increased. Azari, for example, was hired by the Israel Theaters company (operator of the "yes Planet" and "Rav Chen" cinema chains) to monitor a senior employee. The suspicion in the company was that the employee spends working hours elsewhere, and is allegedly also involved in the disappearance of funds. Azari's men followed the man, and it soon became clear that he was devoting hours to a sports course. At the same time, Azari recruited 20 children, and sent them to buy tickets to the film. When the tickets were checked on the company's computers, it became clear that the money had not been registered and transferred to secret slicks. The man was fired from his job. Azari was then hired for a series of cases that the company sought to investigate in Europe. Israel Theaters reported: "No ".response

In another case, an American investigation file reached Azari: a suspicion that a Jew who had committed a \$ 8 million scam had fled to Israel. "They said he was probably in the country," recalls one of Azari's accomplices to the investigation, "but no one knew where he really was. Filed complaints with the police, and Interpol, and activated investigators all over the world. And ... Nada." Azari came up with the idea that the man may be hiding as an ultra-Orthodox in one of the ultra-Orthodox concentrations in the country. It was true: disguised as ultra-Orthodox on the streets of Bnei Brak and Mea Shearim, Natz and .his men located the target

Another person who worked with Azari says that a hawk was also hired by associates of the late Meshulam Riklis, for a very sensitive investigation regarding a valuable art collection, which was transferred to the museum. Azari, according to the evidence, was hired to prove that the collection was temporarily borrowed for display, and not donated .regularly. Tali Riklis, his widow, this week declined to comment or elaborate further

But Azari's great breakthrough was when the oligarchs - first the Jews, then the rest as well - discovered his services. Azari himself told a friend: "Each of these always has one serious conflict with a former partner, and one serious conflict with a woman or ex- ".mistress. At least one of each kind. That's why they need my services

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He can map to you the whole map of the oligarchs for their generations, and who did" what to whom," says one of his colleagues. "Very, very knowledgeable in this market. These guys are devout, if not obsessive, consumers of information, and Aviram, how to say, understood their hearts." For the tasks he received from oligarchs, Azari had a partner from the GSS, the Mossad or the former "undercover". In order to streamline his international activities, Azari established a network of companies in Cyprus, Panama and .Ukraine

Azari, for example, was hired to help a famous oligarch, who suspected that his partners in a large European infrastructure company were stealing from him, after investing huge sums in it. In another case, an equally famous oligarch claimed to have been the victim of several hundred million dollars worth of art fraud. Azari led the suspect in a complex sting operation across Switzerland. How did these affair end? True to the code of silence of the .profession, the researchers we spoke to refuse to reveal

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About a decade ago, Azari also began providing cyber services to its customers. "The agency is skilled in complex computer investigations, including gathering digital evidence and business intelligence, Internet investigations and preventing industrial espionage," .Hawk explains to his clients on the site

Azari emphasizes that "the evidence is obtained solely in accordance with what is allowed by law and can be used in court," but various alleged evidence also emerges. Several private investigators we spoke to say that they heard that Azari was offering information gathering services, which would come from a source whom Azari called "Indian." According to them, Azari claimed that the "Indian" is a factor with high technological capabilities, .and he said that he meets him occasionally in India and elsewhere

The CEO of an intelligence company says that in 2014 he met with Azari. The Indians, he said, can hack and retrieve e-mails and computer content. " "He talked about it as if it were a regular customer service, not a big deal, as if something was completely standard, and completely legitimate." The CEO says he declined the offer and does not know if Azari provided anyone with such services, but because he knows, "another intelligence company ".where the guys there are shaking eggs from the moment they find out about the arrest

Aviram was among the first in the country to establish a cyber unit in Israel," says a" close friend of his. "In recent years, there are private investigators who have become intermediaries between customers and companies that know how to do cyber work. Aviram does not know how to hack into a computer, he can barely send an email, but there ".are companies that know, so argue between them and the customer and charge a fee

Do you think it is related to cyber hacks that took place in Israel? Say Bnei Gantz's cell ?phone

No. There is no chance. He told me he does not work in either Israel or the United States." He does not intercept emails, neither in Israel nor in North America. However, the Americans caught him. Apparently he was not even aware that the information he .".intercepted passes through American servers

?So for whom did he work? Large commercial companies

".Why don't you go higher than companies? Climb higher"

?Leaders of countries

."בן"

?In which region of the globe

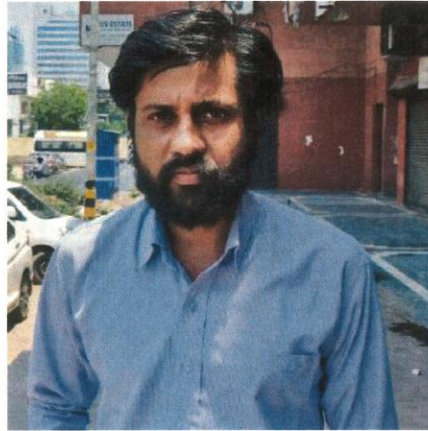
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".The next question. But he did nothing related to Israel. Nothing"

* * *

At first glance, Summit Gupta is a kind Indian computer man living in one of the suburbs of New Delhi. Gupta founded a cyber company called Baltrux in 2012, which states on its website that it aims to assist "private investigators, commercial lawyers, corporate investigators, corporations, celebrities and politicians." How to help? It is not detailed. But in 2015, Gupta, California, was indicted on a string of e-mails. Two private investigators from San Francisco who hired his services were prosecuted. The US government tried to extradite Gupta, but so far without success



Summit Gupta. Traces lead to India

Photo: Reuters

About three years ago, an American journalist began to suspect that someone was breaking into his email. He approached a group called Citizen Love to see if his concern was justified. Citizen Love is a team of researchers from the University of Toronto that investigates suspicions of various cyber crimes, especially those that police have no ability – or desire – to investigate. Citizen Love, for example, has published critical reports on the activities of the Israeli companies Black Cube and NSO, which have resonated around the world

The group's investigators suspected that the journalist was right, and that he was probably not alone. "It was like pulling one thread,"

says John Scott-Rylton, a senior researcher at Citizen Love, in a conversation with Yedioth Ahronoth. "Then see the mighty expropriation that is behind it

Rayilton and his friends suspect that a group of rental hackers – Citizen Love calls it the 'Dark Basin' – broke into emails of about 10,000 people on six continents, including senior politicians, prosecutors, CEOs, financiers and economists, journalists, lawyers and activists Human rights and nature. And yes, Rayilton says that some large law firms in Israel and senior businessmen were also the target of these breaches

The method of stealing the password for the email was mainly in the "phishing" method: the target for the hack receives an email from a person he knows or on a topic that interests him. He clicks on a link that leads to some page, which eventually asks to re-enter the email service. Many have entered the username and password, unaware that they are simply giving the burglars the key to their email. "At first we thought it was a state-sponsored array," Rayilton says, "but very quickly emerged from the variety of destinations and the differences between them, because this array is a private entity for rent

Capital Markets analyst and investment firm Matthew Earl was one of those targets, and even testified to the FBI in the affair. Earl has published reports on the German clearing company Virkard since 2016. "For many years the company has been clearing money from illegal gambling in the United States and has probably made a lot of money," Earl claims. "This celebration ended in April 2011, when the US Department of Justice closed down the major online gambling companies in the United States

Earl says that after he published the reports against Wicard, he began to be bombarded with phishing messages. "I estimate I received a total of about 3,000 such messages," he says. "The emails included extensive knowledge about me and my family. For example, they knew to fabricate an email that allegedly came from my sister, using her maiden

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name and not her marriage name. Quite a bit of work needs to be done to know all these
".details

Wickard has denied that she hired the services of the Indian company or committed any cybercrimes. After the company's CEO was arrested, VP Jan Marslak, who was involved in gathering intelligence at the company, fled and an international manhunt was conducted .after him

So who is behind the mysterious hacker group 'The Dark Basin'? The footprints identified by Citizen Love pointed to – you guessed it – Gupta's Baltrux company. Gupta's wife denied in Bloomberg any connection and claimed that her husband even works in a confectionery. Maybe. But Citizen Love insists the connection is "with high certainty" to .Gupta

Somehow, a large portion of the journalists, lawyers and social activists whose emails were hacked by the 'Dark Basin' dealt with two major issues: the campaign against the .Exxon Oil Corporation, and the suspicions against the German clearing company Wickard

The big question is who ordered these hacks. As mentioned, there is currently no evidence that Axon Mobile or Workcard have anything to do with the Dark Basin and Gupta. So who is? If you ask the FBI, anyone who knows some of the answers to all of these is Azerbaijani. U.S. researchers say his name appears on some of the work orders sent to India. According to the Americans, Azari was even invited to India in August 2016, and met with Baltrux's senior management. The rest of the correspondence ostensibly details how Azari conveyed to the company the names of the targets, and received a regular update .on the hacks and the information allegedly obtained from them

Will the FBI go all the way with these charges? Is all this meant to just make Azari start telling what he knows? If this happens, a great many people around the world – including .some senior Israeli officials – should be concerned. Even very

Meanwhile, Maggie, Azari's wife, returned to Israel with their children. One of the girls has since enlisted in the IDF. The atmosphere at home is not simple, but the family hopes that the affair will end. Joey Ash, former head of the criminal department at the State Attorney's Office and now Azari's Israeli lawyer, tells Yedioth Ahronoth: The charge. After a long conversation with him at the place of his arrest, I believe that after receiving all the material of the investigation we will be able to enlighten the eyes of the American authorities to the picture of the situation, and convince them of his innocence. The heart aches at the sight of a donating Israeli citizen, who served in the reserve as a paratrooper and even participated in the Second Lebanon War, is being held in difficult conditions. We ".are doing everything possible to bring his arrest to an end as quickly as possible

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הסיפורים, הטורים, הפרשנויות וכל מה שמעניין.

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להצטרפות >>

ידיעות אחרונות



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